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AUTHOR Dewalt, Mark W.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the portrayal of eight specific behaviors in prime time television in general, and on those television shows preferred by 1,042 children in preschool through grade 6 who were surveyed to determine their favorite television shows, books, and school subjects. Researchers examined prime time television programs for a period from October 15 through November 19, 1987, for the following behaviors: (1) use of math; (2) reading; (3) positive references to religion; (4) cigarettes; (5) alcoholic drinks; (6) someone attacked; (7) someone shot at; and (8) someone killed. The incidence of these behaviors was correlated with the entire sample of programs, and with the sample representing the children's favorites. It was found that the occurrence of math was the only similarity between the two sets of programs; the children's favorites had less violence, less drinking and smoking, and fewer positive references to religion than the total sample, but conversely, had more references to reading. The occurrence of these behaviors was also examined by time slot, and a relationship was found between the time of broadcast and the occurrence of drinking, smoking, and reading. The discussion summarizes these findings, and also considers the implications of these findings for parents of school age children. The text is supplemented by nine tables, and copies of the student questionnaire and the form used by observers to evaluate prime time programs for the eight behaviors are appended. (27 references) (EW)

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Children and Selected Characteristics of Prime-time Television

Mark W. Dewalt
Assistant Professor of Education
Susquehanna University

February 11, 1988

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Selected Characteristics of Prime-time Television

The A. C. Nielson Company 1987 year-end report indicated that 59% of American households have more than one television, a percentage higher than ever before and a 2% increase over 1986. The same report also indicated that the average family watched television 49 hours and 48 minutes per week, which is a reduction from the 50 hours and 16 minutes watched per week in 1986. (Baker, 1987)

This slight reduction in viewing probably will not assuage the fears of a variety of groups and individuals which include teachers, reporters, parents, researchers, the public interest group Action for Children's Television, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. These citizens are concerned with the amount of television viewing and/or the type of behaviors exhibited by television characters, both of which are legitimate concerns. Liberman (1983) reports that by the time children graduate from high school they will have watched approximately 18,000 hours of television, and that these children will spend more hours watching television than they will have spent in school. As far as content is concerned, a survey by Parents magazine indicated that 60% of the parents felt that most TV programs were not worth watching and 72% said there was too much violence on TV (Guller, 1987). Furthermore, the American Academy of Pediatrics (1986) believes that TV viewing exposes children to too much violence, sex, drugs and alcohol, and that the depiction of these events

implies that everyone does them and that they are risk-free. Postman (1981) believes that televiewing has a pervasive impact on both children and adults, and his latest book, Amusing Ourselves to Death indicates that important national and state issues increasingly are being decided by appearances rather than the understanding of the issues - which is what TV does best.

Numerous researchers have studied the effects of television on variables such as reading achievement, writing ability, imagination and aggressiveness. One such researcher is Huesmann (1984) who reported that boys who strongly identify with violent TV characters are more prone to aggressive behavior. Further research by Eron indicated that the amount of TV violence a child views when they are 8 is the best indicator of how aggressive they will be when they are 19; in fact, televiewing at the age of eight correlates with the type of crimes they will commit.

(Faivelson, 1987). Finally, Newsweek (Hackett, 1988) reported on the growing problem of kids and guns. The article pointed out that constant exposure to violence on television can desensitize children to the effect of firearms. The article also pointed out that fighting is often portrayed on TV as being glamorous and that it is often the first solution to a character's problems. The depiction of violence is even more critical to the young viewer because Weissbourd (1985) indicates that children under the age of three have difficulty understanding the concept of make believe. To these children, a person who is shot on television actually has been shot.

Unfortunately, the portrayal of violence is not the only negative effect of television. Research by Neuman and Prowda

(1982) found a significant negative correlation between reading achievement and television viewing in grades four, eight, and eleven. Mead, Searle, and Word (1985) in a report that discusses the 1979-80 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that for the 70,000 nine, thirteen, and seventeen year old students in the study, those who watched more than four hours of television per day possessed poorer reading skills than children who watched less than four hours per day. Furthermore, Comstock (1982) reports that a 1979-80 California study of over 500,000 sixth and twelfth grade students found that the number of hours spent watching television was negatively related to reading, writing, and mathematics achievement.

Fetter (1984) indicates that another California study of over 10,000 sixth graders indicated that televiewing of one to two hours per day does not hinder reading achievement, however reading achievement decreases as viewing time increases beyond two hours per day. Similar findings were reported in a literature review conducted by Williams, Haertel, Haertel, and Walberg (1982), who indicated that television viewing has a slight positive effect on school achievement up to ten hours per week. Conversely, more than ten hours per week has a negative effect. Finally, a 1984 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that children who come from homes with readily available reading materials and who watch less than two hours of television per day have greater reading proficiency than students from homes without readily available reading material and who watch more than six hours of television per day. (Williams, 1986)

Another problem with frequent television viewing is its effect on the imagination. Both Singer and Singer (1979) and Winn (1977) have pointed out that the imagination is not stimulated when one watches TV because TV gives the viewer the images. Conversely, the process of reading requires the reader to create images from words, which improves imaginative abilities and creative writing ability. Thus an excessive amount of televiewing may limit a child's writing ability, which was verified by research conducted by Pierce (1983). Pierce found that the writing ability of middle school students was negatively related to the amount of time spent watching television. For example, Joan Schloss, a fourth grade teacher in California stated "When I was reading students' stories for a young author's project, I was shocked because the content was so violent. The stories reflected what children see on TV - monsters and killing. There was nothing creative or imaginative about them." (NEA Today, 1987)

Watching television not only affects reading achievement, imagination, and aggressiveness, but it takes time away from other important activities. Many teachers are concerned with the child who continually stays up late watching television and as a result is fatigued during school. Other problems caused by frequent tele-viewing are less time spent working on homework, conversing with family members, engaging in sporting activities, playing, and reading for pleasure. For example, a study conducted at Tufts University indicated that our nations' young people became more obese from 1960 to 1980 and that one of the factors was excessive television viewing. (United Press International, 1987)

Method

With television consuming a vast majority of the leisure time of this nation's children, the question of what is being portrayed on television was addressed by this study. Thus, this study examined the portrayal of reading, mathematics, religion and other selected behaviors on prime-time network television. In addition, elementary students were polled to determine their favorite television shows, books, and school subjects.

The data for this study was collected from two forms devised by researchers at Susquehanna University. The first was an interest inventory containing five questions which was completed by elementary students. A copy of the instrument is located on page 20 of the appendix.

The second instrument, which was designed for this study, was used to record eight specific behaviors exhibited by characters on prime-time television. The instrument was a sign system and as such it was a low-inference measure of certain behaviors which occurred; the observers did not judge behavior to be appropriate or inappropriate, but simply recorded the behaviors exhibited. The 37 observers of TV shows were trained in the use of the observation instrument and were given a set of definitions for each of the categories on the instrument. Observers were then assigned certain shows to watch. The observers recorded the number of times each of the following eight behaviors were exhibited in each episode: (1)use of math (2)reading, (3)positive reference to religion, (4)cigarettes, (5)alcoholic drinks, (6)someone attacked, (7)people shot at (8)people killed. A copy of the observation instrument and definition of the

behaviors is located on page 21 of the Appendix.

To determine the prime-time TV programs that children liked best, a stratified sample of elementary age children in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia was selected. This sample of 1,042 children in grades pre 1st through 6 included children in rural, suburban, and urban areas in twenty-eight schools in twenty-two school districts. The sample was composed of 47% males and 53% females. As Table 1 indicates, minority students comprised 12% of the sample. A breakdown of the grade level of the students in the sample is included in Table 2 and state of residence is listed in Table 3. Tables 2 and 3 are located on page 17 of the appendix.

Table 1

Race of Students in the Sample

Race	Frequency	%
Black	104	10
White	916	88
Other	22	2

The sample of prime-time programs observed was taken from the shows broadcast between October 15, and November 19, 1987. Sixty-two different prime-time television programs were observed including 166 different episodes which totaled more than 121 hours. The number of times each program was observed is contained in Table 4. Programs not included in the sample were TV movies, sports events, variety shows, commercials, and news reports. It should be noted that the results of this study are limited to describing the selected sample of 62 prime-time television shows between 8:00 and 11:00 p.m. which were broadcast between October

15 and November 19, 1987.

Researchers mailed the interest inventories to selected teachers in the study, who administered the survey and returned them to the researchers for analysis. The responses to question 1, What is your favorite TV show? are displayed in Table 5. Alf and Cosby were the clear favorites of the children with Alf being selected by 37% of the children and The Cosby Show being selected by 25% of the students. Forty-one percent of the students reported some type of cartoon as one of their favorite shows, and only four students did not have any favorite television shows, three of whom did not have a television in their home.

Table 5

Children's Most Liked Prime-time TV Shows

TV Program	Frequency of children who picked as 1 of 3 favorites	%
Alf	387	37
The Cosby Show	265	25
Growing Pains	104	10
Who's the Boss?	87	8
Family Ties	81	8
Rags to Riches	57	5

The same students also answered the question, What subject do you like best in school? The results displayed in Table 6 indicate that Math was clearly the favorite subject of the children in the sample (42%) while 29% of the children indicated reading to be their favorite subject. Several students selected one or more subjects as their favorite. The students were also asked to indicate their favorite free time activity. These results, which are listed in Table 7, indicated that 15% of the students liked bike riding the best. Watching television was the

favorite free time activity of 10% of the students.

The students were also asked to indicate the best book they had read. The students selected 645 different books with no single book being selected by more than 2% of the students.

After collecting the instruments used to observe the TV shows, the researchers computed the mean and standard deviation for each of the eight behaviors measured in the study. The researchers also calculated the means and standard deviations for three time slots, programs broadcast between 8:00 - 9:00, programs broadcast between 9:00 - 10:00, and programs broadcast between 10:00 - 11:00. After inspection of this data, the researchers tested for significant differences of the behaviors observed in each time slot by using a Chi Square analysis. Researchers then determined the mean and the standard deviation of each behavior for the top five shows children ranked as their favorites. The same procedure was used with the five shows which were the favorite shows of the American populace. The five favorite programs of the American populace was determined from weekly ratings during the weeks of October 15 to November 19, 1987 as reported by the Associated Press (1987) and Variety (1987).

Results

The study was designed to measure eight behaviors exhibited on prime-time television and as a follow-up to the study conducted by Dewalt and Ossenfort (1987). Of the behaviors observed, reading occurred the most frequently with the average

occurrence of 4.2 times per hour. (see Table 8) The incidence of drinking was 2.4 times per hour, while people being attacked occurred at the rate of 1.2 times per hour. People were shot at the rate of .9 per hour and people were killed at the rate of .9 times per hour. Cigarettes were smoked on the average of .8 per hour. The use of mathematics occurred at the rate of .4 times per hour and positive reference to religion occurred at the rate of 5 times per hour. Furthermore, 129 of the 162 episodes observed did not have any use of mathematics and 132 of the episodes did not have a positive references to religion.

Table 8

Means and Standard Deviations for Each Behavior

Behavior	Total Sample		Childrens' Favorites		American Populace	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Mathematics	.4	1.1	.4	1.1	.3	1.5
Reading	4.2	5.6	7.0	5.5	5.9	4.8
Religion	.5	1.4	0	0	.5	1.9
Cigarettes Smoked	.8	1.9	0	0	0	0
Alcoholic Drinks	2.4	4.1	.1	.5	3.6	8.2
People Attacked	1.2	1.9	0	0	0	0
People Shot	.9	2.6	0	0	0	0
People Killed	.9	2.3	0	0	0	0

Childrens' Favorites = Alf, The Cosby Show, Growing Pains, Who's the Boss?, & Family Ties
 American Populace = The Cosby Show, A Different World, Cheers, The Golden Girls, & Growing Pains

Table 8 also indicates the means and standard deviations for each behavior for the shows children picked as their favorite. It is interesting to note that reading was depicted 7 times per hour. Positive references to religion, smoking, and people being

attacked, shot or killed were not displayed on these shows and drinking occurred only .1 times per hour. As can be seen in the table the average occurrence of math is the only similarity between the groups. The favorite programs of the children had less people being attacked, shot at, and killed than the total sample. The childrens' favorites also had less smoking, drinking, and positive references to religion than the total sample of 62 shows. Conversely, the children's shows depicted much more reading per hour than the total sample.

The mean incidence of each behavior for the top five programs of the American populace are also tabulated in Table 8. These shows depicted no cigarettes being smoked or people being attacked, shot at, or killed. Reading occurred at the rate of 5.9 times per hour while the use of mathematics occurred at the rate of .3 times per hour. People drinking alcohol occurred at the rate of 3.9 times per hour. Positive references to religion occurred at the rate of .5 times per hour.

The results of this study closely match those found by Dewalt and Ossenfort (1987) for prime-time programs in 1986. The occurrence of reading was 4.5 times per hour in 1986 and 4.2 in 1987. The occurrence of drinking was 2.3 in 1986 and 2.4 in 1987. The number of people being attacked, shot at, killed, and smoking was higher for the 1987 prime time sample, however this is probably due to the fact that the 1986 sample did not include programs from 10:00 to 11:00. The 1986 study did not measure positive references to religion and use of mathematics.

The mean and standard deviation for each behavior for shows in the 8:00 - 9:00 time slot, the 9:00 - 10:00 time slot, and the

10:00 - 11:00 time slot are located in Table 9. A Chi Square analysis was used to test for differences among the time slots for the behaviors of reading, smoking, drinking, people being attacked, people being shot at, and people being killed. The analysis indicated a significant difference between the time slots for reading (Chi Square = 51.9, df = 30, $p < .01$), smoking (Chi Square = 24.0, df = 12, $p < .02$), and drinking (Chi Square = 39.1, df = 18, $p < .01$). This indicates that there was a relationship between the time a program was broadcast and the occurrence of smoking, drinking and reading. The most dramatic difference is the occurrence of alcoholic drinks, with this behavior much more prevalent on programs broadcast between 9:00 and 11:00. The other key difference is that smoking was more prevalent on programs broadcast between 10:00 and 11:00.

Table 9

Means and Standard Deviations for Each Behavior by Time Slot

Behavior	8:00 - 9:00		9:00 - 10:00		10:00 - 11:00	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Mathematics	.4	1.2	.5	1.1	.4	.9
Reading	4.0	5.3	4.4	4.6	4.6	7.1
Religion	.5	1.5	.8	1.8	.2	.6
Cigarettes Smoked	.6	1.9	.6	1.2	1.4	2.4
Alcoholic Drinks	1.4	2.7	3.7	6.0	2.9	2.8
People Attacked	1.4	2.2	.9	1.4	1.5	1.9
People Shot	1.3	3.4	.4	1.2	.9	1.8
People Killed	.9	2.8	.7	1.5	1.1	1.9

Discussion

The results of this study point to a variety of important factors. The first is that both positive and negative behaviors are exhibited on prime-time television. This is best exemplified by the fact that reading occurs on the average of 4.7 times per hour, but people were attacked at the rate of 1.0 times per hour and people were killed at the rate of .7 times per hour. However in the 1986 study by Dewalt and Ossenfort, one observer indicated that they would not have noticed the reading if it had not been one of the behaviors being observed in the study.

A second important finding of the study is that both the children's top five favorite shows and the top five shows of the American populace had very few instances of people being attacked, shot, and killed. This is encouraging because it may indicate a trend away from these behaviors as an essential ingredient of television programs.

A third point to remember when interpreting the data from this study is that many behaviors were not measured. Behaviors not included were references to sex, verbal abuse, swearing, chase scenes, drugs, stealing, kidnapping, and verbal threats. As one observer indicated, "Why don't you measure verbal abuse? I hope you do next year, this show is just terrible." Another observer refused to watch another episode assigned to them because of the poor quality of the program which became apparent when she took time to record the behavior exhibited by the characters. It should also be noted that the study did not measure many aspects of pro-social behavior and positive messages

which some programs convey. For example, some programs have addressed the problem of adult illiteracy.

The fact that positive references to religion occurred at a rate of .5 times per hour should send a strong message to the leaders of religious groups. This fact is even more important with the knowledge that the average family spends just under 50 hours per week watching television. This leaves little time for religious study or for aiding those in need.

Parents should be aware of both the amount of time their children watch television and the content of the programs. They should make sure that televiewing does not take time away from other important activities such as playing, reading, conversing with family members, and homework. As Winn (1977) has indicated, families who have participated in research designed to assess the effects of no televiewing for certain lengths of time usually see an increase in reading and conversation between family members, which these families found encouraging. Unfortunately, when the study was concluded most families started watching television again; reading and family conversation returned to the pre-research level.

Parents who are interested in reducing excessive televiewing by their children should remember that if they want their children to watch less television they should provide or suggest something else for them to do. (Slavenas, 1987) For example, they should provide plenty of appropriate reading material for their children, take them to libraries so the children can select their own books, model good reading habits themselves, and read

to their children every day. Tips for reducing time spent televiewing include:

1. Turn off the television when the program is finished.
2. Don't be afraid to say NO to certain programs or televiewing in general.
3. Set limits on number of programs per week and then work out a schedule of viewing with your children.
4. Reduce the number of televisions in use.
5. Gradually reduce your child's televiewing to one hour or less per school day.

Parents also need to assist their children in realizing that what they view on television may not be acceptable behavior in their home or neighborhood. As often as possible parents should view programs with their children and discuss the consequences of violence, fictional nature of the programs, and selling techniques used in commercials. (Fasarelli, 1984) In addition, parents may need to monitor television programs as done in this study, and then restrict their children's viewing to shows with acceptable patterns of behavior. As one Susquehanna University student stated "I wouldn't want my own children to grow up in this kind of [violent] atmosphere so why would I want them to watch TV when this atmosphere is so prevalent."

Parents concerned about the amount of television their children or family watch should read the books by Potter (1983), Charren and Hulsizer (1986), Winn (1977), or Coleman (1983) for suggestions to use TV viewing more effectively or reduce the time spent watching TV.

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Appendix

Table 2

Grade Levels of Students in the Sample

Grade	Frequency	%
Pre 1	23	2
1	27	3
2	229	22
3	485	47
4	200	19
5	14	1
6	64	6

Table 3

State of Residence of Students in the Sample

State	Frequency	%
Pennsylvania	712	68%
New Jersey	17	2%
New York	22	2%
South Carolina	211	20%
Virginia	80	8%

Table 4

Frequency of Observation of Prime-time Programs in the Sample

Program	Times Observed	Program	Times Observed
Frank's Place	3	Sledge Hammer	3
Kate & Allie	4	The Charmings	1
Newhart	3	Full House	1
Designing Women	3	I Married Dora	3
Cagney & Lacey	3	Mr. Belvedere	1
Houston Knights	3	Spenser for Hire	3
Jake & The Fatman	2	Pursuit of Happiness	1
The Law & Harry McGraw	3	Ohara	1
The Oldest Rookie	2	Alf	3
Magnum P.I.	2	Valerie's Family	2
The Equalizer	3	Matlock	2
Tour Of Duty	3	J. J. Starbuck	3
Wiseguy	1	Crime Story	3
Knot's Landing	1	Highway to Heaven	4
Beauty & the Beast	2	A Year in a Life	3
Dallas	3	St. Elsewhere	4
Falcon Crest	3	The Cosby Show	4
My Sister Sam	3	A Different World	5
Everything's Relative	3	Cheers	3
Leg Work	3	Night Court	2
Murder She Wrote	2	L.A. Law	3
MacGyver	4	Rags to Riches	2
Who's the Boss?	2	Private Eye	1
Growing Pains	2	Miami Vice	3
Moonlighting	3	The Facts of Life	2
thirtysomething	1	227	3
Perfect Strangers	3	The Golden Girls	3
Head of The Class	3	Amen	3
Hooperman	3	Hunter	3
The Slap Maxwell Story	2	Family Ties	3
Dynasty	2	My Two Dads	2

Table 6

Favorite Subject of Children in the Sample

Subject	Frequency	%
Math	434	42
Gym	154	15
Reading	137	13
Science/Health	104	10
Art	69	7
Spelling	66	6
Other Language Arts	42	4
Social Studies	31	3
Music	25	2
Recess	18	2
Handwriting	8	1
Library	6	1

Table 7

Favorite Free Time Activity of Students in the Sample

Activity	Frequency	%
Bike riding	158	15
Playing with friends	102	10
Watching TV	102	10
Playing	97	9
Football	82	8
Reading	65	6
Playing outside	34	3
Playing games	29	3
Playing school	24	2
Pets	23	2
Visiting relatives	22	2
Shopping	21	2
Drawing	19	2
Skateboarding	19	2
Swimming	17	2
Soccer	15	1
Basketball	15	1
Fishing	11	1

Copy of interest questionnaire completed by sample of students

1987 Interest Questionnaire

Grade: _____ Race: _____ Sex: _____

1. What subject do you like best in school?

2. What is the best book you have ever read?

3. What three TV programs do you like best?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4. What is your favorite thing to do in your free time after school or on weekends?

Copy of recording instrument used by observers

Susquehanna University 1987 TV Study

Program: _____ Date: _____
Viewer: _____ Time: _____

times someone used mathematics: _____

times someone read: _____

references to religion: _____

cigarettes: _____

alcoholic drinks: _____

times someone attacked: _____

people shot: _____

people killed: _____

Comments:

Copy of definitions used for this study

Definitions for 1987 TV Study

- 1.read: anytime someone reads a newspaper, book, magazine, letter, sign, computer terminal, etc.
- 2.mathematics: anytime someone uses math to solve a problem or figure out how to do something.
- 3.religion: anytime someone (in a positive manner) attends religious services, talks about attending, talks about a belief in God or a Supreme Being, prays, or reads a religious book. This would include any religion.
- 4.attacked: anytime someone touches or attempts to touch someone in order to inflict bodily harm.
- 5.shot: anytime someone is shot or shot at with a gun

General Directions:

You will record events of each scene only once. For example, if John is reading at a computer terminal you would indicate this by placing one slash in the # times someone read category. If in a later scene, John is again working at a computer terminal you would record this in the same way as above. Thus you would have two slashes in the # times someone read category. If Sam is shot and killed you would record one slash in the # people shot category and one slash in the # people killed category. Use the comment section to explain any unusual situations or themes. For example, it would be significant to note that "Cheers" takes place in a bar.